

Rural life and Kabaddi: Reflectives in Tamil cinema 'Vennilla Kabaddi Kuzhu'

Arunkumar AS¹, Jesurathnam Devarapalli²

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Author Affiliation:

¹Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology Pondicherry University, Kalapet, Puducherry 605014, India; Email: akred04@gmail.com
²Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Pondicherry University, Kalapet, Puducherry 605014, India; Email: drjesudev@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Kabaddi is one of the indigenous games of India that is gradually acquiring recognition in the global sports arena. In one hand when the game is gaining popularity through corporate intervention, on the other side it has become a reflective of local cultural realm. By taking up the rural game of Kabaddi as theme the Tamil cinema Vennilla Kabaddi Kuzhu has managed to portray the reality of village life in every nexus. This article has managed to deal with the different contexts of cinema and has tried to understand the social aspects in it through analysing the contents.

Keywords: Kabaddi, Caste, Games, Media and cinema

1. INTRODUCTION

Leave apart cities, in the near future it will be either in our reminiscence or very rarely watch children playing games like Hopscotch, Marbles and glass balls, Hide and Seek, Swing, Kite Flying, Gulli-Danda etc., even in the villages. Perhaps now with the advent of exotic games like cricket, tennis, badminton etc. children eventually have changed their course towards these games. The broadcasting of these exotic games in television popularised, heightened and created an imprint of popular culture in the minds of people and the very impact of exotic games on our recreation and games culture has almost brought the traditional games into the milieu of extinction from reality duly because of the paucity in the transcended of these games to our next generation.

Apparently in the recent decades with the after effect of globalisation, where everything is perceived as commodity and market, the functional value of Sports and Games have been modified altogether with market values and seemingly as a potential of profit and business. Sports and games are commodified dysfunctionally appropriating the cultural functions of it connoting a drag with the tag of popular culture. This tendency is found across the world where the potential market is big with every popular game, but however, a basic question as raised by Loy and Kenyon (1969) that "Is the place on the scale of values the same for advanced industrial societies as for the emerging countries or does the status of sports in advanced societies influence the value placed on sports in less advanced societies" (Loy and Kenyon 1969: 15). This is a serious question on the valuation of the place at which the indigenous game like Kabaddi is placed on par with the exotic sports such as Cricket, Tennis etc., in our land.

Indian society or in any culture, sports and games play a crucial part of enculturation, functions as a device of teaching unity, provides agility and endurance to the social life, professes the physical capability through cultural realms in construing a society. These games primarily are the basic source of socializing the children through the involvement of movements and most importantly on the development of skills, paying attention to one another and adapting to each other (Sahay 2013 :17). If we consider culture as something which is related to the activities of human nature, then sports, games and recreation is an integral part of it. Or in other words, if the expression of human nature in its modes of living and thinking and its everyday activities is culture, then sports and recreational activities must be the immersion in the realm of culture (MacIver, 1963: 74). Sports and games as part of culture have different functions in different societies. For some society promotes the group integrity but in some other society it provides a platform of equal opportunity to gain prestige and honour. In many societies, sport and games are related with the life cycle emotions like the birth, marriage and death (Dunlap 1969: 22).

The study conducted by Nakornkhet (1989: 115), on traditional games of different societies asserts that different societies place different value on physical and sports activities. Meanwhile, the study of Brewster (1955: 99) has compared the traditional games of India with the notes of similar games in other parts of the world and emphasis on the similitude of games on the culture. Similarly, the argument on the social realm of games and sports basically is that “the study of the socio-cultural aspect of movement is concerned with the cultural connotation of movement and the way in which movement is understood in society” (Felshin 1972: 134). Though, social scientists working on culture did not acknowledge sport as a domain of investigation during earlier days, in recent past argue that “the study of sports and games of different nations provides a touchstone for understanding how people live, work, think, and at the same time provide related data to other facets of political and economic life” (Cozens and Stumpf 1969; Morton, 1963; Oloyede & Akinkuade, 2017).

2. KABADDI: A RURAL GAME

Kabaddi is a main stream village sport of India, formally institutionalised due to its promotional and commercial aspect. The institutionalisation of the game undeniably has taken the sport to new heights in its development and also has been acknowledged widely across the globe. The Kabaddi Federation of India that came into existence in 1950 took upon the task of standardising the rules of the game. Within the period of five years in 1955 the first ever national level meet for men was conducted in Chennai and for women in Kolkata during 1955. For the first time the game got the global appreciation through the inclusion of Kabaddi in the Asian Games held in 1990 at Beijing. Since then, the federation has been sternly involved in the progress of the game. Undoubtedly Kabaddi is the only indigenous game that endorses popularity world-wide from Indian soil.

There is another aspect of Kabaddi that has been translated from the streets of rural India to the universal media of cinema about which the paper deals with. Kabaddi is one such indigenous games that emerged in the land of India and spread abroad. In south India, it lexicons the meaning of Kabaddi as derived from the words ‘kai pidi’, literally meaning ‘hold the hands, which is the most prominent act in playing Kabaddi. The game of Kabaddi, unlike other indigenous games had been formally institutionalised as a sport of global acclaim, thereby it managed to ensure a corporate exposure. But still in rural villages of India, the face of Kabaddi still retains the same, imbued with the social and cultural realm linked with honour and prestige.

3. STRUCTURAL REFLECTIONS OF VILLAGE LIFE IN THE GAME

Rural face of the game Kabaddi is a definite area of study of interest to those who really understand the nature of impute involved in it especially with the attribute of caste wary. Kabaddi in India has been considered as the popular entertainment of males and especially in Tamil Nadu it is the fever of the youth. It is aspired by all sections of society, irrespective of caste, creed and economic position but, however, not all play together unbiased. In the villages of Tamil Nadu, a minimum of two to three teams are available. And each team is based on caste for definite and in accordance with friendship, residence in the same street and neighbourhood randomly. A clear visible disjunction can be drawn along the lines of caste as upper caste and lower caste in constituting a Kabaddi team. Thereby, accordingly village may have two or three teams with in it. Most often these teams do not play with each other as it would erupt communal tensions. According to a former school level state player who hails from the rural area of Trichy, ‘even when inter village matches and tournaments are held the participation of teams depends upon who (upper caste or lower caste) would be the organiser of the tournament’. Alas, it is quite a norm that if the organisers are upper caste only upper caste teams from different villages hails for the match and the vice-versa. Despite, that in the case of multi-caste participation it should be that the lower caste to lose the match or else it shall erupt communal tensions.

There was a report recently in the dailies that on behalf of our 70th Independence day celebration in Gurgaon, Haryana there was a solidarity friendly match held between Yadav and Dalit to send a message of inter-caste unity. Unfortunately as the dalit

team outperformed the other and were announced the winners, the Yadav community players outraged and thrashed them saying 'how can you low caste people win against us? We'll leave you in such a state that you can never play again" (Dayal, 2016).

The attitude of losing a game against a lower caste opponent vests the matter of pseudo pride and becomes matter of shame for the upper caste rather treating it as a sport. But however, this game of Kabaddi is a common game for all the caste people with a castetist air. This face of the Kabaddi is perhaps the original cultural face of the rural sport which apparently is with obvious reality. Reflections of this face of Kabaddi has been hardly filmed in India and while one such movie is the Tamil cinema -Vennila Kabaddi Kuzhu (2009), directed by Suseenthiran and was remade later during 2014 in Bhojpuri as Bhadlapur Boys by Sailesh Verma.

Perhaps the cinema as a medium of popular culture has exposed this face as a mirror of the society. The film is an ethnographic representation of the stance of Kabaddi in the country side of south India and holds a platform to understand the social realms of the village. An analysis of the formerly said Tamil cinema is made through the methods of discourse and content analysis to interpret the nexus of a typical rural village and the place of Kabaddi as a game, sport and recreative activity in a village.

4. KABADDI AND CINEMA

Inclusion of Kabaddi in the sequences of Indian cinema is not a new phenomenon. Ever since the inception of the Indian cinema, the film makers had always afforded and strived hard to make their films more realistic and aesthetic. They have always added a new set of techniques in order to attain the realism so that the audience would feel the reality in a more natural sense. Many Indian cinemas have used the sequence of Kabaddi in the plot of scenes to provide and enhance the essence of actant of village rurality in natural sense. The second reason for plotting a scene sequence with Kabaddi is to strengthen the protagonist's heroic nature in proving his manliness by winning the match which provides him the honour and pride – the conventional form of portrayal on the character of Indian cinema's hero.

Also in the history of Tamil cinema, the game of Kabaddi has been an important signifier of aggrandizing the establishment of rurality in contrast with the urban and embellishing characters of rural. In the film Kudumba Thalaivan (1962), directed by M.A Thirumugam where the protagonist M G Ramachandran (MGR), plays a lustic rural role of an irresponsible lad of a landlord father. He used to spend most of his time with his village friends, roaming with them and playing Kabaddi with them. Here in this film the game of Kabaddi emphasise the rural nature of the plot converging with the affirmative nature of the winning hero. The game of Kabaddi is also shown as an act of disgust apartheid which is a waste of time.

Later in the subsequent films that emerged in Tamil industry had used Kabaddi only as a signifier of rurality. In the film Gilli (2004), directed by Dharani, adopts Kabaddi to acclaim the position of creating continuity in the plot of the story. In Gilli there is much more than the other films to discuss. According to the plot of the film it has to intersect between the urban and rural, and in order to minimise the gap Kabaddi is utilised. In the film the protagonist who is city bred saves a rural girl who is tormented by the villain insisting her to marry him, despite her resentment and dislike for him. The protagonist helps her protecting from the villain. Here in this film, Kabaddi is the means that links the city bred to reach out to the village, help her out also in getting abroad. Because the sequence of the cinema is threaded in such a manner so that the urban hero being the Kabaddi player had come to the heroine's rural place for a match is a fine link that is justifiably recreated through the actant of Kabaddi. Secondly, in the movie it becomes a convincing attribute on the stance to project the hero as a champion of Kabaddi who eventually comes out of the opponent court, similarly rescue the girl from the nexus of the villain. Generally in Tamil cinemas, certain sequences are used mainly Kabaddi is also adopted to show-off the endurance and to enlighten the manliness of the hero.

Unlike in other films, the game of Kabaddi has been a significant actant rather being a plot emphasising the verisimilitude of rurality. Vennila Kabaddi Kuzhu depicts the value of Kabaddi as a game in the realm of rural village. The film has based its plot in a village near Palani, Dindugul district of Tamil Nadu. Its track is a simple story-teller conveying the success of a hard working Kabaddi team in a rural village. Eventually the story is all about the youngsters in the village who belong to different social strata, distinguished into caste and economic backgrounds vehemently passionate and involved in playing Kabaddi from their childhood. The protagonist belongs to a lower section (lower caste) of the village, while the other members of the team are all from relatively upper sections. The one-line of the film deals just as the normal common sports genre where the protagonists of the movie try their hard to win over the trophy after going through major hardships and reckless fate in the climax. This movie too designs a similar kind of genre but in a rural background.

Every character in the film who are the members of the village Kabaddi team, have their own affair of occupation designated instinctively by the social order of the village. Sekar, the captain of the village Kabaddi team is an owner of a rice mill; his companion Ganesan has 3 fields of Guava farm and is an agriculturalist; Pandi, does not specifically have any job but not from a poor background. Moorthy is a contract worker in the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board; while Iyyappan owns the sole whole sale petty

shop in the village which his father had set up after he returned from Military and finally Kalimuthu, a local money lender. This is the regular team named as Vennila Kabaddi Kuzhu (Full Moon Kabaddi Team) set for the matches and tournaments against other teams. Indeed, the protagonist Maari who had to drop out his schooling during his childhood because of the early death of his father and unfortunately had to work in the village headman's farm since then, is included for the game only when they practice for the match in the playgrounds of the village. Otherwise Maari is always considered the substitute for the players and is made to sit outside every match holding the clothes of the team members. Though the team has talent, knowledge about the game, the team had set a perception of infamous for never winning a game in their history among the villagers. Thereby, it becomes a dream for the team to win a local tournament atleast once in their life time.

Obsessed with continuous loss in matches, they plan to set a match against the neighbouring weak team during the upcoming village temple ceremony. On the day of the match Kalimuthu does not turn up on time for the match, instead had gone for the collection of interest on the amount he lent and that made Sekar heated with anger. Immediately, the very moment, captain asks Maari to play the match in lieu for the first time ever, turning his fortune. As the game proceeds, the Yerramaikanpatti player engages in a foul play with Maari eventually abusing him to which Maari reacts furiously hitting the opposite player creating a violent atmosphere. Though the opposite team manages to escape the place, the villagers insult the team for raging the fight with the neighbour village saying the game was useless and the team can never be triumphant.

Perhaps humiliated by the words of the villagers they decide to attend a tournament that was happening in Madurai of which Iyyappan had seen a poster a couple of days before. After reaching the spot for tournament, to their astonishment they find that this tournament was a state level match and teams here were selected through winning the district level matches. So they had to leave the spot and while they were about to leave, suddenly they learn that their district team has unfortunately met an accident and hence they join unopposed as Dindigul district team. Savadaimuthu, the coach of Tirupur Papermills team recommends the idea of replacing Vennila team for the original team as he had witnessed the game once during his visit to Kanagampatti for the village temple ritual. In a controversy that erupts with the captain of Papermills team and manager he retreats from the position of coach and decides to train Vennila Team. With rigorous training and match techniques, the team manages to win all the matches and reaches the finals. Hearing the news the villagers are satisfied, amazed and the whole village arrives to witness the final match. In the final match on a final tie-breaker match point, Maari manages to secure a match point from the opposition by receiving a death blow ultimately taking his life however, winning his team.

The film recreates the village ambiance in its cinematography by naturally grounding the camera in the village. Though it had managed to recreate the structure of the village social life, no direct caste connotations of any character is being uttered in the whole film. Instead, it uses the characters occupation which is the very character of caste to apprehend the caste significations. There has been many instances in the film whereby the village structure and the narration of typical caste orientations are finely captured. But otherwise, starting from the dialect of narration, language, routines, and the physical structure reflects the village set up.

During the practice play for village festival, Sekar's father pass by and criticizes Sekar for being always found playing Kabaddi. Adding boast to that his companion also comments and advises Sekar's father to command Sekar out of this business as he is always found playing with others and low caste youths. The portrayal of Sekar has to be viewed as the matter of emphasising the dominant status he enjoys in the village. Thus, he is kept the captain of the team with a commanding voice over all other players of the team. Meanwhile, other players are conned with their occupation to which Maari is a farm labour that has a subsided character of being recessive and therefore is made to sit outside for every match.

Not only that the caste significations are further expressed during the tournament where after winning the first match the host village's headman invites the team for a feast next day into his house. There during the dinning, the headman's mother eventually enters the scene asking "whether all you guys belong to the same street". To which Maari's body language subsumes with guilt and immediately the lady catches him asking whether he belongs to the lower streets in their village. The address on the street here refers to the village settlement pattern according to the caste hierarchy. Meanwhile the reaction of Maari to the question denotes the prohibition on commensurate or the prohibition of common dinning in the village social organisation. The structural arrangement in village settlement pattern in Indian society provides a comprehensive understanding on the caste wise residence in a village.

As in the case of similar films the outer agents like the military man is considered as the actant against all the conventionalities of the village. The military man's son is one such example as referred by Kaali (2002: 175) in his work understanding the role of military man as the agent of change in the village, can be reconsidered in this film as the pacifier of castistic conventionality. He is at every point of time is with Maari. As soon as Maari returns home from his farm Iyyappan use to come to his house. And as in every other conventional film the protagonist who is from the lower section of the village is dead without any valid reason in the film and the film concludes with a sad ending with the love of the protagonist not succeeding.

5. CONCLUSION

While the institutionalised form of Kabaddi is taken up by the overall media, the rural format of Kabaddi which incorporates the functional and cultural values is mediated by the film Vennila Kabaddi Kuzhu. The film combines the nativity of the village and its caste character to provide a realistic narrative and content. However, no other film has eventually emphasised on the cultural realm of the game – Kabaddi to have it as a document.

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interests.

Data and materials availability

All data associated with this study are present in the paper.

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